

Cairo's chronic traffic jams: The price of bad public planning

Dina Samir, Wednesday 24 Oct 2012

Congested streets in the capital where 20 million people live are a daily nightmare for Cairenes and cost the country billions of pounds. Ahram Online talks to experts about the roots and solutions for the problem



In the last few years, Cairo traffic has become a major problem that is costing the country a significant amount of money and Cairenes their lives.

According to a recent study by the World Bank titled, "Cairo Traffic Congestion" at least 4,000 Cairenes are injured and 1,000 Cairenes die each year in traffic related accidents, of which more than half are pedestrians.

The same study claims that the capital's congestion problem costs the country EGP50 billion (US\$8 billion) a year, which is four per cent of Egypt's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This is four times the amount lost by cities of the same size.

The figures are determined by calculating the loss of productivity due to citizens sitting in traffic rather than working, the additional fuel consumed due to extended travel times and the environmental impact of increased vehicle emissions. The study also considers indirect costs, such as the effect of the environmental degradation on public health.

Traffic experts believe that the Egyptian government needs to develop a coherent vision in attacking the roots of the problem as well as applying solutions developed by other cities with traffic problems.

President Morsi's transport plan

During his election campaign, President Mohamed Morsi vowed to tackle five key issues in his first 100 days in office, one of which was traffic congestion. In his plan for improving traffic, President Morsi singled out 21 approaches.

According to online independent monitor "Morsi Meter", only two of those points were implemented: removing street vendors blocking roads and the launch of telephone services and announcements on local radio traffic stations guiding drivers to less clogged streets.

In his speech during the 6 October War anniversary celebrations, President Morsi said that traffic had improved by 60 per cent.

Traffic expert Magdi El-Shahed said that President Morsi should have outlined the bases of that conclusion.

"Is it really 60 per cent better today than how the traffic was last year or before the revolution? I personally believe this was a random percentage based on no solid proof," El-Shahed says, before explaining that one of the 21 points was to cease wheel clamping because it blocks streets.

However, during the last few months, there has actually been an increase in clamping, which, he says, shows Cairo's traffic department is not aware of Morsi's plan.

There has been an undeniable increase in traffic police on Cairo's streets during the last few months but no real improvement in street congestion.

Origins of Cairo's traffic problem

Saadeddin Ashmawy, international expert in traffic and former dean of the Faculty of Commerce of Al-Azhar University, explained in his study on Cairo's traffic that the root of Cairo's street congestion is due to faulty urban planning decisions and insufficient public transportation.

Ashmawy explains that moving some of the ministries and public buildings to Cairo's satellite city 6 October, under the assumption that the staff would also move there, is an example of bad decision-making, as the government took no measures to encourage people to relocate.

In addition, when the government built an industrial base in Cairo suburb Helwan in the 1960s, they did not provide suitable housing for workers. This resulted in workers commuting daily from different parts of Cairo, pressuring the limited means of transportation and road networks.

It also decreased workers' productivity because of the wasted hours spent travelling every day.

Omar Nagati, an architect and urban planner, believes that the government did not take the Egyptian public into consideration, exemplified by the fact that 70 per cent of Cairenes live in ashwaayat (informal housing)

without adequate access to public transportation.

An example Nagati cites is Cairo's famous ring road which cuts through the capital's working-class districts of Imbaba and Boulaq. Despite the fact that the inhabitants can see the freeway from their balconies, the government did not give them access to it.

A weak public transportation system is another cause of Cairo's traffic problem.

Nagati explains: "if there was reliable and humane transportation, people would prefer to use it."

It has also become easier to own a car in the last decade due to the decrease in car taxes and the mortgage system that encourages people to buy a vehicle.

During rush hour, cars on the chronically congested Mehwar (one of Cairo's main highways) often only carry the driver. If the space these cars occupy was replaced with minibuses that transport more people, Nagati notes, congestion would be decreased by at least 30 per cent.

"If the money that was spent on highways in Cairo in the last decade was invested in developing public transport, the situation would be a lot different now."

The inefficiency of public transport, Ashmawy points out, has led to a similar increase in the number of taxis, that alone constitute about 15 per cent of the traffic during rush hour.

Furthermore, the number of private buses for governmental organisations and companies exceeds the number of public buses.

"In a populated city like Cairo, there should be at least 10 metro lines," Nagati says, adding that the government should have focused on expanding the capital's underground transport network.

Clearer Cairo roads in the future?

Nagati asserts that officials should change the way they address the problem while involving local communities.

The top-down approach officials take to approaching the issue, he continues, has resulted in people taking the situation into their own hands such as organising minibus and tuk-tuks stops in areas that are not served.

The attitude towards informal transportation should be changed, Nagati adds.

"Instead of demonising tuk-tuk drivers, for instance, and looking at the phenomena as a sign of backwardness, officials should work on integrating them in a system."

El-Shahed believes that decreasing the daily number of vehicles coming to Cairo from other governorates (which constitutes about 1.5 million vehicles) would help.

"[They should] provide public transportation at the Cairo toll gates and parking lots where people can leave their cars and take transportation into Cairo," El-Shahed suggests.

The 2008 traffic law has to be revisited to ensure road discipline, El-Shahed adds, as the legislation currently allows major violations to be punished with small fines.

For example, he continues, citizens driving without a license are fined just LE50 (\$8). Microbuses that are left at the entrances of bridges or crossroads also only pay LE50.

He went on to suggest that the driver should be ticketed, rather than the owner of the vehicle, when he or she has committed a violation and that these tickets should not be added to the car's license.

"Many of the taxi drivers do not own their cars," El-Shahed explains.

"They would adhere more to traffic laws if they were paying for their violations, not the car owner."

Both sources agreed that Egyptian officials should look to countries that have dealt with traffic congestion issues for solutions.

A common formula, Ashmawy notes, is encouraging people to use public transportation instead of driving cars.

In Rome, for example, the government allowed people to ride buses for free in the morning and afternoon to motivate people not to drive to their workplace. In London, 80 per cent of the inhabitants use public transportation when returning home after work.

Restricting parking in central busy streets and allocating lanes for public transport during rush hour are two other tactics which Ashmawy says Egypt could adopt.

El-Shahed adds that traffic police have to be educated about transport legislation as "they themselves do not follow traffic signals and organise traffic according to their own systems."

Looking at the future of Cairo's traffic, Nagati does not expect to see radical solutions implemented.

"We are not seeing any changes in public policies, not in traffic, nor in housing, infrastructure or anything. We are only seeing reproduction of the old regime but in new shapes," he concludes.

"Yet, we can only hope that after the revolution, officials will base their decisions on what is best for the people."

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